

PARTNERING THROUGH TRAINING AND PRACTICE TO ACHIEVE PERFORMANCE IMPROVEMENT

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This article presents a partnership effort among managers, trainers, and employees to spring to life performance improvement using the performance templates (P-T) approach. P-T represents a process model as well as a method of training leading to performance improvement. Not only does it add to our repertoire of training and performance management methods, it assists trainers and managers to promote change, achieve flexibility in performance, and enhance the fluency of skill application with regard to critical performance events.

OFTEN THE PATH TAKEN to performance improvement begins with a manager or trainer. Performance templates (P-T) represent a process model as well as a method of training that leads to performance improvement. The P-T approach examined in this article not only adds to our repertoire of training and performance management methods, it also assists trainers and managers in promoting change, achieving flexibility in performance, and enhancing fluency of skill application with regard to critical performance events. The approach is an example of what Harbour (2009) refers to as integrated performance management. There is some recent research (Lyons, 2007) that presents applications of the P-T approach in the field. The research, however, deals with relatively small samples and contains some other limitations. Nevertheless, on balance, the research helps to establish both the efficacy and practical value of the P-T approach.

The primary objectives of this article are to offer a description and the activities of the P-T approach, along with some information regarding its theoretical foundations, and present an example of how P-T processes are used in practice, so as to give readers sufficient information to consider the use of the approach in their organizational setting.

THE PROMISE AND POTENTIAL OF THE PERFORMANCE TEMPLATE APPROACH

The explanation here of the explicit steps and activities that define the P-T process will help to illuminate how P-T shapes the roles of the manager as performance improvement advocate, teacher, sponsor, and coach. It also provides a means for continuous learning by managers, trainers, and employees in the service of improved performance. In a sales organization, for example, P-T training not only builds product knowledge and skills for interacting (personal and technical) with customers, it also helps employees build more meaningful relationships with customers because template use and refinement require high levels of attentiveness and vigilance for customer needs.

The P-T approach helps managers develop their cooperation skills because they are required to interact effectively with trainers and employees to shape performance scripts that will be effective in practice. The scripts, or templates, are flexible and malleable and may easily be updated and improved based on employee input in the field. These features enable managers to focus on results. At the same time, managers are sharing their knowledge resources, broadening employee and trainer access to

Capture of reactions is vital to the P-T method. Research (Kleingeld, van Hartie, & Algrera, 2004) has demonstrated that direct involvement of employees in capturing performance details as informed participants can stimulate improved performance. Some basis must be used for the timing and frequency of updating and revising the templates. Actual frequency of use of a template may dictate the chronological basis for adjustment. Regardless, templates need to be adjusted based on learning and feedback. The feedback is basically formative, intended for development and change (London & Sessa, 2007). At the individual level, it is well established that goals and performance feedback are among the most effective interventions available to improve learning and performance (see Locke & Latham, 1990).

This is the crucial step in the P-T process because the learning is amplified in several directions. For example, suppose the group of interest is sales agents for a global manufacturer of high-quality fitness equipment such as treadmills, steppers, and free weights. There may be two dozen sales agents in our group. In step 6 above, the information learned from implementation of a particular template by sales agents from activities such as individual customer visits, participation at national or international trade shows, and at major, competitive fitness events is fed back into the template development process.

The information has implications for learning transfer for at least three groups of individuals (training staff, managers, and employees) and perhaps other individuals (say, customers). This transfer is stimulated by the parallel feedback processes at individual, group, and organizational levels. The sales agents are working, changing, and receiving feedback at the same time that the managers and training staff are learning. We have taking place, simultaneously, both formative feedback as the templates are modified and summative feedback (longer-term) as performance indicators are examined for effects (London, 1995).

In keeping with the advice of Schultz (2007), we move practices into routines and sustain process improvements by way of continual reinforcement. From a broader perspective (Hwan, 2009), and reflecting on the field of human performance technology, the P-T approach demonstrates a transition from training to performance and also shows how to assist in the transition from performance to a performance system. As the approach may spread to other parts of an organization, we can contribute to the activation of a learning organization.

performance information, and demonstrating collaborative approaches to different aspects of knowledge attainment and skill improvement.

PROCESS FEATURES OF PERFORMANCE TEMPLATES

In the performance template approach, both learning and performance are regarded as combined in a series of deliberate steps that over time are largely reflexive. The P-T model has great applicability and flexibility and may be used from the smallest to the largest organization. This section describes the features and dynamics of learning and performance.

1. Managers first identify key processes and critical performance events (CPE) associated with those processes. Thus, important tasks and functions are identified clearly. An example of a CPE in a typical business is, "Managers supply each employee with an up-to-date, clear description (orally and in writing) of expected performance outcomes and results."
2. Training designers and the managers who oversee key processes confer in order to isolate the essential elements of the CPE for which information, knowledge, and skills are to be created or enhanced. Agreement among the designers and managers is required for this phase.
3. For each CPE addressed, following the training, we must have in hand an initial performance template. Training and education in the construction of the template often make use of a variety of methods, tools, and concepts as appropriate in the circumstances. It is assumed that the training is conducted with intact teams or groups, preferably small groups to encourage maximum individual participation in the template-building process. When completed, the template is usually represented as a written guide or script created to reflect the activities and behaviors required in the successful implementation of the CPE.
4. Once a few templates have been developed, employees must use them in typical work situations that contain CPEs. The templates can be made available in print, in CD-DVD, on a Web site, or something else for easy access.
5. Each time a template is used or applied by an employee in a CPE, the employee is expected to reflect on the use and note what was learned (e.g., about customer reactions) or what information was missing, and feed that information back to the design staff (contact person).

Following is a summary list of the steps in the performance template process:

1. Identify critical performance CPEs
 2. Decide which CPE to address in the training work
 3. Plan and design the training activities to house CPE performance in templates
 4. Prepare template materials for shared use in practice and in the field
 5. Use the templates on the job
 6. Engage in individual reflection on template application and reporting
 7. Adjust and improve the templates
- These attributes compose the main characteristics of the P-T approach.

THEORY BASES FOR THE CREATION OF PERFORMANCE TEMPLATES

Given the complexity of the concepts and theory that support the creation and maintenance of performance templates, a complete exposition of the material is beyond the scope of this article. The details are found in other work (Lyons, 2009). The theory grounding for P-T includes constructivist, expertist, and learning regulation theory, the last being housed in the action theory of Michael Frese (2007). Each of these theories and concepts helps to explain the creation of templates and their application. Most of them are sensitive to the reflective aspects of the P-T approach. The recently revised version of action theory (Frese, 2007) represents the content of the P-T approach more fully than other theories and has both action and regulation focuses. Indirectly, it also includes elements of constructivist and experiential learning.

Action Theory and Performance Templates

Performance templates work is a novel situation in the combined training and creation phases and then evolves into regular and iterative situations in application in the field, followed by examination and revision. In regulation of behavior, feedback is an important component, and in the P-T processes, it is a required element for both learning and implementation. Action theory is characterized in this way:

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formants and to the objective work outcome. It is a behavior-oriented theory. But unlike behavioristic theories, it is concerned with the processes that intervene between environmental input and behavior: the regulatory function of cognitions. (Frese & Zapf, 1994, p. 272)

This definition fits well with the template processes identified in this article as they involve training, learning, and work activities in a directed, regulated process. Action theory helps us to advance beyond what Salasbury (2008) refers to as a piecemeal approach to the management of knowledge of cognitive processes. The theory provides a framework for understanding the regulation of knowledge in a performance context. The theory contains three elements (Frese, 2007) whose interrelationships provide the bases and dynamics of the theory: focus, sequence, and action structure. The first two elements, focus and sequence, present ideas that likely are familiar to trainers and training developers. Focus is mainly about critical self-reflection that employees practice in the implementation of their training in the field. Sequence offers a somewhat familiar order of mental work that takes place as the employee enters and progresses through her or his actual task environment. This mental work includes goal setting, mapping the environment, planning, monitoring the execution of the training, and feedback processing. It is the action structure component of action theory that offers some new ways of conceptualizing training through the regulation of learning.

Action Structure

While sequence represents the steps taken in the creation and implementation of a template, action structure is about the mechanics of regulation: the mental processes and behavior that take place to enact regulation so as to attain the desired results. As mental work, structure is superimposed on most of the components of the sequence. The use of performance templates, particularly the reflective activity, is representative of a type of training in itself in which one learns to consciously attend to and improve one's behavior. We may suppose that management wants to observe the successful application and improvement of the templates as a result of the steps in the process in which employees learn and then help to create, apply, and improve templates as a deliberate, thoughtful set of activities.

PERFORMANCE TEMPLATES AS APPLIED

To fully demonstrate the efficacy and application of P-Ts, this section offers details of a test of the approach. The test is part of a larger study of employee motivation and

The trainer identified teams of four or five persons to work together. The various intervention activities were then randomly assigned to teams. On their own, teams used their personal experience, expert opinion from customer service literature, and the like to shape their basic script documentation for practicing an intervention. In a second whole-group session, each team gave a report of the topics and findings of their tentative script documentation aimed at addressing problems related to the specific CPE. The script is a guide to action, not a word-for-word set of phrases as might be used in a dramatic play or film.

First, a CPE from among several possibilities was chosen by the trainers for study. The trainees were to identify weak or flawed practices in the particular CPE as well as useful and helpful practices. Individually, trainees prepared a one-page summary of the problems, issues, and opportunities that the practices presented to them. Then in a whole-group session, the trainer facilitated a discussion that ultimately led to identifying a set of potential improvements or interventions in performance of the CPE. The interventions were ones that supervisors or employees could apply to problems. For example, an intervention might concern approaches to use with a customer who does not have an explicit and well-articulated set of product needs. There are several possible activities that can enhance this work.

The participants were trained at length using the template creation approach for CPE. Unlike the C group, the T group had to be trained not only to help create the templates but also in reflection and reporting skills for use when feeding information back to the trainer and managers after applying the templates in the field. As a result, the training of the T group took most of one more day than did the training for the C group. (The training used reflects similar and successful methods in some other studies; Lyons, 2005.)

Preparation of the Template Group

The participants were trained at length using the template creation approach for CPE. Unlike the C group, the T group had to be trained not only to help create the templates but also in reflection and reporting skills for use when feeding information back to the trainer and managers after applying the templates in the field. As a result, the training of the T group took most of one more day than did the training for the C group. (The training used reflects similar and successful methods in some other studies; Lyons, 2005.)

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A different trainer worked with each group. Both trainers had at least a bachelor's degree, and both were independent.

Trainers

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One limiting feature of this study is that only two forms of training were used owing to reasons of practicality and cost. From the same population of customer service representatives (employees), two samples of participants were identified for training. They were randomly selected for either template (the T group, $n = 29$) or conventional (C group, $n = 27$) training. In both samples, the purpose of the training was to improve the service and communication skills of the employees to help them be more effective and successful.

- Rating of helpfulness of training by the employee (customer service representative)
- Performance rating of employee by the manager (supervisor)
- Customer satisfaction with the employee's product knowledge
- Customer satisfaction with the employee's overall performance

Measures of performance for each employee were gathered, and the two groups of employees were compared on these measures:

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customer satisfaction is the remaining domain for which measures were used. According to Walker, Churchill, and Ford (1977) and Avila and Fern (1986), customer satisfaction is regarded as a practical and important variable for examining customer service representative performance. In this study, customer satisfaction was represented using two measures. A random sample of the customers who interacted with these employees (157 individuals in a population of 1,163) over the past several months was contacted by an independent sales consulting organization 4 months after completion of training and asked to provide ratings of consumer products representative on two variables using a rating scale from 1 (*low*) to 7 (*high*) for individual knowledge of products and processes (e.g., warranty services) and overall performance of the employee. Overall, 94% of these contacts yielded both ratings for the employees.

Results

The use of basic statistical tools (mean scores, correlations, tests of mean differences, analysis of variance) revealed the following facts that help to demonstrate the efficacy of the P-T approach:

1. The average ratings of the T group were higher than those of the C group on all four measures.

2. Correlations regarding the two customer-based ratings only (product knowledge, overall performance) indicate that for both groups the measures are not highly correlated, indicating that the measures are relatively independent.

3. A comparison of the measures across both groups indicates that the T group has significantly higher ratings than the C group for three of the four measures: performance rating by manager, customer satisfaction with product knowledge, and customer satisfaction with overall performance.

Although it is not realistic or accurate to say that the P-T approach is superior to conventional training with regard to a precise cause-and-effect relationship, the results provide a clear indication that P-T training and related process activities have a positive influence on employee performance.

CONCLUSION

There is always a need for new or modified training and performance methods to add to the repertoire of those engaged in human performance technology work, especially methods for which efficacy has been demonstrated in some measure. The P-T approach presented in this

Each team, with trainer input, refined its tentative script documentation to reflect the most needed actions or features for improvement. The resulting script, still subject to modification, is one that is ready for rehearsal and practice. Within each team, individual members modeled and demonstrated, one at a time, the improvement script. This interactive modeling and team member reactions and input help to reinforce skill fluency. Each team member modeled the intervention script. The trainer visited each team and observed progress, asked questions, and offered suggestions. These steps were used only with the T group in their training.

Preparation of the Conventional Group

Among the instructional approaches used were short lectures, role taking, case analyses, and problem solving. In general, topics and methods appropriate to customer service improvement issues were presented and applied. The issues were all reflective of CPBs. Some self-assessments augmented this work. The template creation and maintenance methodology was not applied at all in the training of the C group. The participants were told that their knowledge and skills regarding interactions with customers would be enhanced with the training and their job performance would improve.

Performance Assessment

Following training, all participating employees went about their regular job duties. The T group was given the data and online information, reporting formats, and structures to enable them to use the templates developed in the training sessions and to report, or feed back, their reflections on the template information. Over the next 4 months, almost all template-trained employees used the template process with fidelity.

Measures

For comparisons of the two employee groups, four measures were used. The first was a supervisor rating of the performance of the employee, a global rating on a scale from 1 (*low*) to 7 (*high*). Recent research (Rotundo & Sackett, 2002) supports the use of this measure as the employee's immediate manager is most likely to possess current and valid information on which to base an overall, or global, performance rating of an employee. As an indicator of the trainees' belief that the particular training they received was helpful in terms of improvement of direct contact with customers, the trainees were asked to rate the "helpfulness of training received." A 5-point scale was used (1 = *Not Very Helpful*, 2 = *Marginally Helpful*, 3 = *Not Sure/Undecided*, 4 = *Somewhat Helpful*, and 5 = *Extremely Helpful*). Finally,

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